



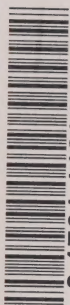
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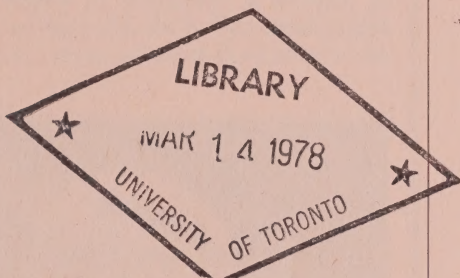
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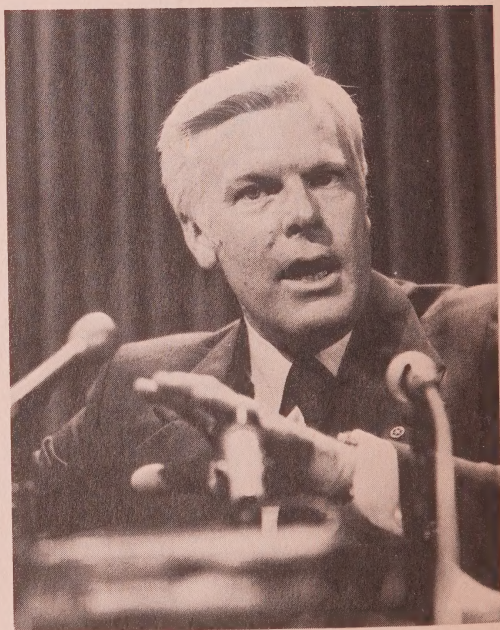
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The Community School Idea



Text of an address by
Hon. Thomas L. Wells,
Minister of Education

Community Education Ontario '77 Conference
Niagara Falls, Ontario
March 4, 1977



Hon. Thomas L. Wells,
Minister of Education

I am very glad to have this opportunity to assess where we stand with respect to the community school idea in Ontario.

Although I can hardly believe that time can fly so quickly, it is now almost 2-½ years since I spoke to a conference similar to this one, attended by people who shared a specific interest in community schools.

It was in London, Ontario, and in effect it was the kickoff for all of our subsequent attempts to stimulate further development of the community school idea in all areas of the Province. A great deal has happened in these last two years, and much progress has been achieved.

Tonight I would like to re-stress a few basics about the community school idea, and reaffirm our strong interest in it.

Some people have been asking for a clear and definitive statement of Ministry policy respecting community schools, and I have come fully prepared tonight with a succinct statement. Here it is:

“The Ministry of Education is strongly in favour of, and supports, the further development of community school activities in all areas of the Province.”

That is it.

Please do not interpret this as being a facetious response to a serious question. It is certainly not intended that way.

Avoid rules, models, structures

But I do believe that, once and for all, we should recognize very clearly that when we talk about the community school idea, we cannot talk unduly about definitive policies, rules, models, concepts or organizational structures that attempt to spell out all details.

If we fall into that trap, our arbitrary lists and parameters will inevitably be restrictive, and serve only to impede what is essentially an ever-broadening concept of people interacting with people.

Attempts to set out definitive policies or models relating to community schools are almost certain to become bogged down right at the outset in trying to define the term “community school” in a way that will cover all of its aspects, and satisfy all people.

The true community school shows itself more as an attitude than as a definable entity — more

of a "way of doing things" than a building or a list of procedures.

For me, the term community school conjures up a mental picture of a neighbourhood school serving as a catalyst towards developing a community identity, a neighbourhood sense of involvement and spirit — a place where men and women and children can get together for all kinds of educational, social, cultural and recreational activities — a place where people can go freely, for whatever purpose, without feeling threatened or out of place.

A definition like this, of course, could be applied to any number of buildings in a given community — a church, the YM or YWCA, a library, a recreation centre, and so on.

The logic in focussing on the school lies mainly in the fact that there is a school building in virtually *every* community, that the school has a program which ultimately affects (and is affected by) the community, and that the school normally has a broader range of facilities than the other institutions I mentioned.

Rapport between schools and other agencies

Certainly my idea of a community school does include close working relationships between all social agencies which serve a community, ranging from recreation people to social and health workers, as well as educators.

These relationships should start with efforts to increase dialogue on a regular basis, and lead to better co-ordination of activities or sharing of facilities.

To me, it is integral to the community school idea that there be real co-operation between schools and other social agencies which serve a community. More co-ordination and integration of people-oriented services can be to everyone's advantage. Duplication of effort can be minimized, and we can avoid situations where two or more agencies may be trying to help the same people in isolation from each other.

The real potential of full co-ordination and co-operation between all social agencies lies in stronger and more extensive services for citizens, both young people and adults.

There are so many aspects and so many possible variations to a community school — or to the community school idea itself — that it is

difficult to know how best to tie it together into one package.

The principal is the key

To my mind, the individual school principal is the essential catalyst. Look at any school which has some characteristics of a *community* school and you will surely see a secure, confident, people-oriented outward-looking man or woman as principal.

This is where it all begins.

This is the kind of person who can communicate candidly and easily with parents, who can without anxiety encourage parents to visit the school during classroom hours, who can visit groups of parents in their homes to discuss the curriculum, who can be easily accessible on the telephone, and who can place a great deal of emphasis on parent-teacher interviews, especially at report card time.

This is the kind of person who can comfortably work with a School Advisory Committee made up of parents, students and teachers, who can work with a group of young mothers to establish a day-care centre in a vacant classroom, and who can promote the idea of parent volunteer programs without anxiety.

This is the kind of person who gets enthusiastic when a group of neighbourhood residents ask if they can use the gym on Tuesday evenings for badminton and the general-purpose room for a new bridge club that's being formed.

This is the kind of person who jumps at the invitation of a group of local clergymen who want to explore the idea of organizing a community senior citizens' club and using the school's facilities for a varied program of activities.

This is the kind of person who contacts the local crafts club to see if one of its members would instruct grade 5 and 6 pupils after school on Wednesdays, and who contacts the local library when a group of parents express an interest in forming a book discussion group.

This is the kind of person who meets with the principals of four neighbouring schools, along with a social worker, a fellow from Parks and Recreation and a young lady from a local fitness institute, to work out plans for a Saturday morning club for 10 and 11 year-olds.

This is the kind of person who understands that the school's first responsibility — the educa-

tion program for its pupils — can be enhanced and broadened by an open-door policy that constantly has people moving two ways across the doorstep.

This is the kind of person who understands that a school does not suddenly become a *community* school with the flip of a switch after 3:30 P.M. on school days, or on Saturdays.

This is the kind of person who understands that a community school does not need a sign out in front to so designate it, but rather earns its status through an outgoing and co-operative attitude that reflects an honest desire to involve and work with people for mutual benefit.

It should also be said that this type of person is not necessarily a “super principal.” No one person can do it alone, because there is a collectivity about the whole approach.

Principal needs support

The school board, for example, must make it known that it wants this kind of interaction. The administration must be able and anxious to provide the support that is needed, even if it is only moral support. Teachers must be given a chance to understand more about community involvement, and how they might help its growth.

Everyone who is part of the school — the principal, the teachers, the custodian, the secretary, the librarian, the public health nurse — everyone is part of the total community school.

Over the past couple of years, I have said many times from many platforms that the major over-riding challenge facing educators these days is to restore public confidence in our schools. For a variety of reasons, public perceptions of what is actually going on in the classrooms — in terms of the quality of the education program — has taken a negative turn, and this is a situation which cannot be allowed to continue.

Intense need for public involvement

There is an intense need today for meaningful involvement of the public, especially parents, with the school. In some cases the need arises because of an organized demand from community or parental groups. More often, however, the need arises for precisely the opposite reason — because there is no organized demand, no community activist group, just a great many ordinary parents and citizens who don't understand what is going on in the school.

These people may not be circulating petitions or appearing in delegations before the board, but their concern about the school's program may not be any the less. I say this because it is human nature to be uneasy and suspicious about things which are not explained and which we do not understand.

The kind of school principal I described a moment ago — the secure, confident, people-oriented outward-looking principal — probably doesn't face this situation, at least to the degree that some others do. This person's school may never have been labelled a "*community school*," and quite possibly the term "*community school*" isn't even in the local vocabulary.

But a rose by any other name is still a rose. A school where the principal and the staff, in the normal scheme of things, build open rapport with parents and other residents in the community, who involve them in the daily life of the school — and who welcome and encourage a wide range of activities using the building's facilities — is a community school by my definition, regardless of whether the thought has ever crossed the principal's mind.

This is why it is so futile and time-wasting to expend a great deal of effort wrestling with community school definitions or policies or organizational models for others to follow.

This is why caution should be exercised against building the community school area into a segmented specialty, complete with experts and a jargon all its own.

Let me try to give you a very practical example of the dangers of talking about the community school idea as some sort of a *program* which can be adopted (or not adopted) by deliberate decision — or as a plan which, if you follow step-by-step instructions or checklists, will give you a recognizable identity as a community school.

Impact of recent curriculum changes

Over the past six months in particular, there has been a great deal of talk about a general tightening-up of the curriculum in Ontario schools. The booklet entitled *The Formative Years*, which is the official provincial curriculum policy for up to grade 6, spelled-out the various components of a well-rounded curriculum in a fairly precise manner, and much was made of the

fact that the “basic skills” were very specifically stressed.

Last October and November, we made some further changes that will affect students in grades 7 through 10. The number of required subjects for students in the first two years of secondary school was extended, and we committed ourselves to producing more substantive and prescriptive curriculum guidelines beginning immediately.

We all have been hearing the “back-to-the-basics” theme for some time now, not only from anxious parents and newspaper editorial writers, but also from some educators. These changes which we made regarding the curriculum were inevitably interpreted as being part of that theme — which to a certain extent is true, I suppose, but not to the extent that we are turning back the clock to the “good old days,” as some people have speculated.

However, if stories I hear are accurate, a few people in education are interpreting this shift in curriculum policy as reflecting a return to the old days of the closed-shop school — and, by extension, a turning away from the community school idea.

How this kind of conclusion can be drawn from recent developments I am not certain. But I suspect that part of the answer lies in the fact that, in the minds of some people, “community school” is a plan or program you lay on — or remove — at will, depending upon the circumstances of the moment.

To look at it this way, of course, is to miss the point altogether.

Congenial open-door policy needed

Actually, considering the fact that public confidence in education is sagging these days, the need for a congenial open-door policy in all of our schools has never been greater. Frankly it wouldn't concern me at all if principals were *unaware* of the term “community school.” The important thing is that they be encouraged to adopt the open attitudes which are necessary for parental involvement, good communication, and healthy rapport between the school and its neighbouring community.

The recent changes in curriculum in this Province have not diminished our support of — nor our determination to encourage — the community school idea. In fact, it is today more im-

portant than ever to the total educational process — and indeed to the total strength of neighbourhoods and communities — that schools reach out to their broader constituency, and develop better rapport with parents and others.

From my vantage point, I would have to conclude that significant strides have been made in this direction during the past two or three years. Many more school boards have demonstrated a real awareness of the need, and an increasing number of schools throughout the Province are reflecting this awareness.

For its part, the Ministry has done a number of things aimed at stimulating and supporting developments at the local level — fully recognizing that the initiative of individuals is far more important than a governmental wave of the hand in building the kinds of relationships that are inherent in the community school idea.

Extensive grant program

Probably the most visible example is the Community School Development Grant program which we announced in London 2-½ years ago. Altogether about \$2 million has been expended under this program, through 374 specific grants around the Province.

The diversity of these grants serves to underscore the wide parameters of the community school area, and the many approaches which can be taken to generate increased awareness and activity. Some have been used to help hire staff members to work as catalysts at the board level or at the school level. Some have been used to assess community needs or concerns, or to define ways in which schools and other agencies can be more effective in meeting more needs.

Some of the grants have been used to increase person-to-person communication with parents or with all citizens in particular neighbourhoods. Some have been used to bring groups of adults into schools for meaningful dialogue or activities. Some have been used to run workshops designed to promote and explain the community school idea generally, or to explain specific activities like volunteer programs.

These are just a few general examples, but they do illustrate the various kinds of approaches being taken by school boards and schools.

Other steps taken by the Ministry

In addition to this special grant program, a

variety of other steps have been taken, in particular the following:

(1) The establishment of the Minister's Advisory Committee on Community Schools, under the chairmanship of Mrs. Judy White of London, which has been meeting regularly since September of 1975, and which has continually kept me informed of needs and developments in this area.

(2) The designation of specific officials in each of our nine regional offices throughout the Province to act as community school resource people and catalysts.

(3) The creation of a Community Schools Unit within the Ministry's head office at Queen's Park, which has done a great deal to keep our own activities running on course — and which, although badly understaffed at the moment, should be back to full strength soon.

(4) The massive distribution of two factsheet pamphlets to parents: 58,000 copies of the pamphlet titled *The Community and Its School*, and 350,000 copies of *Parents and Teachers Working Together*.

New handbook on community schools

Some of you know that we have also been working for a long time on a much larger publication containing ideas and examples related to community schools. I am very pleased tonight to be able to say, at long last, that it is ready, and that we are releasing it here tonight for the first time.

The publication is called *Open Doors: A Community School Handbook*, and it is quite different from the usual type of publication produced by the Ministry. It is 92 pages in length, liberally illustrated, written by a professional education journalist, Miss Margaret Gayfer, and contains a series of case-study articles describing interesting activities in a wide cross-section of Ontario schools and communities.

The handbook makes very easy and very interesting reading, an approach which we deliberately followed in view of the wide audience at which it is aimed — not only trustees, school board officials, principals and other educators, but also persons related to other social agencies and bodies, and interested citizens and community groups.

To some, the handbook may be something of a disappointment, because it does not lay out a

model blueprint for a community school. Quite the contrary, in fact, since it describes a vast range of activities and projects having as their only common denominator the community school theme of *people working together*.

The handbook does not purport to be the final word on community schools. Rather, we hope that it will serve as a catalyst, and result in a better understanding of the broad idea that is conveyed in its title — Open Doors.

Copies of the book will be available outside the room at the conclusion of this meeting, for you to pick up. We will welcome your comments and evaluation.

Beginning next week, distribution will be under way to a wide range of groups, including schools, school boards, recreation organizations, community associations, the media, and so on. Special efforts will be made to publicize the handbook to the public, because we want to get it into the hands of as many interested citizens as possible. The initial press run was a quantity of 25,000, but I believe that we will have to go to a second printing almost immediately.

Approaches that deserve support

I said at the outset that we support and encourage all activities that fall under the community school umbrella, and that we support activities and attitudes which lead towards a meaningful open-door policy in all schools. Without limiting the deliberate generality of this commitment, let me summarize by saying that the Ministry of Education particularly supports the following:

One, activities that lead to increased involvement of parents and others in the daily life of the school.

Two, activities that extend the school as a neighbourhood cultural, recreational, social and learning centre for people of all ages, regardless of whether the school or some other body offers them.

Three, efforts by schools or school boards to take the first step in reaching out to other people-oriented agencies in the community, such as the recreation department, social services department, the local Board of Health, the Children's Aid Society, and so on, to establish ways in which they might effectively exchange information and co-ordinate their efforts and activities.

Four, efforts by schools and boards to improve communications with parents and others, which will lead to a better public understanding of the schools' program.

Five, programs and projects that encourage schools to use community resources, both people and places, as part of the educational process.

Six, efforts by school boards to regularly review their policies affecting all of these areas, and to provide their staff appropriate support which will enable the further development of any aspects of the community school idea.

To the extent that these approaches, and the related activities which they imply, represent the broad objectives for all of us in promoting the community school idea with vigour and imagination, I definitely believe that we are headed in the right directions in many communities across Ontario.

The promise and the challenge

The message which all of us must carry forward to school trustees, administrators, principals, teachers, parents and other social agencies — indeed to entire neighbourhoods and communities — is straightforward enough.

Part of the message is that the community-school partnership is dedicated to the idea of a people-oriented society in which the members of the school community and members of the community at large work together for the benefit of all citizens.

Part of the message is that the starting point for a good community-school relationship lies in the hands of the people concerned — the principal and the teachers of the school, and the parents and other citizens of the community. We must explain that it cannot be imposed from the outside on any community or school, and that it can only come about as a result of people working together, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding.

And finally, we must explain to all concerned that, by their very existence and the relationship they have to one another, every school and every community holds the potential of a community school.

The promise is there.

The challenge is to make it a reality in more and more communities.

Thank you very much.